DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 036 PS 024 798

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TITLE Preference for Social Support by Indian Street Children and Adolescents in Stressful Life Situations.
PUB DATE [95]
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Children; Coping; Family Relationship; Foreign Countries; *Homeless People; *Indians; Life Events; Parent Child Relationship; Punishment; Sex Differences; Sibling Relationship; *Social Support Groups; *Stress Management
IDENTIFIERS India

ABSTRACT

This study had three aims: (1) to identify stressful situations faced by Indian children and adolescents working on the streets; (2) to study their preference for social support when faced with stress; and (3) to identify gender differences in social support preferences. One hundred 8- to 18-year-olds, working as beggars, vendors, or ragpickers, or who were self-employed, comprised the sample. Observation and interviews were used to identify stressful situations related to the workplace, earnings, home, school, peers, and siblings. A Q-sort technique was used to collect social support preference information. The results indicated that a majority of the children preferred to be alone in most stressful situations, especially those related to the workplace, peers, and parental punishment. They commonly sought their parents' support when they needed money, faced sibling problems, or did household chores. Mothers' support was preferred to fathers', grandparents', and other relatives' support. More boys than girls preferred to be alone in stressful situations, and a larger percentage of girls sought their mothers' support in comparison to the boys. Children's preference for social support provides information on self-reliance, effective survival and coping strategies, the nature of family relationships, the quality of social interactions, and the stressors that street children and adolescents face in difficult circumstances. (KDFB)

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PREFERENCE FOR SOCIAL SUPPORT BY INDIAN STREET CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS IN STRESSFUL LIFE SITUATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The present study was undertaken in the city of Chandigarh, India with an aim to (a) identify the stressful situations faced by children and adolescents working on the streets; (b) study their preference for social support when faced with these stressful situations; and (c) study gender differences if any, in the preference for social support in these situations.

The sample consisted of 100 children and adolescents on the streets (boys $\underline{n}$ = 50; girls $\underline{n}$ = 50) in the age group of 8-18 years working as beggars, vendors, self-employed and ragpickers. Stressful situations, identified using observation, discussion and feedback from the subjects, were categorised on the basis of causal factors as those related to work place, earnings, home, school, peers and siblings. The data for preference of social support in these situations was collected using the 'Q-sort technique' wherein 12 photographs depicting different social contacts were used.

Results revealed that a majority of the children prefer to be alone in most of the stressful situations, especially those related to the work place, peers and parental punishment. Children commonly seek the support of their parents when they are in need of money, when they face problems with their siblings or while doing the household chores, though the preference for mother's support is reported to be higher as compared to that of the father. Grandparents and relatives find less favour in the children's preference for support. More boys than girls prefer to be alone in stressful situations and comparatively, a larger percentage of girls seek the support of their mother as compared to the boys. Children's preference for social support thus throws light on the development of self-reliance, effective survival and coping strategies, the nature of family relationships, quality of social interactions and the stressors that street children/adolescents face when growing up in difficult circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

Children who spend a major part of their childhood working on the streets, form the most vulnerable section of the society. They face a number of problems, hazards, stressors, harshness and brutalities at the hands of the society. Working on the streets to earn a living exposes these children to countless problems which may be a source of threat to their well-being and which requires immediate counter-action. These problems may be related either to the home, the work place, earnings, the family, peers and siblings. Whom do children turn to in these situations and how do they overcome their problems is a cause for concern. Seeking social support which may be emotional appraisal, informational or instrumental is one way in which the children can tackle stress. This may be a source of reassurance, an esteem booster, a point of advise or guidance which helps reduce the psychological distress related to stress and makes one feel in control of the situation. It may facilitate adaptation to the stressful situation, thereby reducing the threat faced by an individual. The preference for social support in different situations, would thus reveal the social networking and family relationships existing in the environment of the street children, thereby, also indicating the nature of trust and belief of the children in those who constitute their close family group and the social milieu.

OBJECTIVES

* To identify the stressful situations faced by children and adolescents working on the streets;
* To study their preference for social support when faced with these stressful situations; and
* To study gender differences, if any, in the preference for social support in these situations.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for the study consisted of 100 working children and adolescents on the streets (boys n = 50; girls n = 50) in the age group of 8-18 years working as beggars, ragpicker, vendors and self employed.

Procedure

The stressful situations faced by the children were identified by observing the children on the streets and by getting a feedback from them. The stressful situations were then categorised on the basis of causal factors into those related to the work place, financial needs, peers, siblings, parents and other household problems. The data was collected using the 'Q-sort technique' wherein the children were shown photographs of 12 possible social contacts to whom the children could turn to in situations where they (a) are troubled by police/estate officers; (b) are troubled by elders/employers at place of work; (c) are toubled by customers; (d) are in need of money; (e) have a fight with peers; (f) have a fight with siblings; (g) are scolded by parents; (h) have excess household responsbilities ; (i) face parental conflicts. These included photographs of (a) a male child alone; (b) a female child alone; (c) mother; (d) father; (e) relatives and neighbours; (f) grandparents; (g) male siblings; (h) female siblings; (i) siblings of both gender; (j) male peers; (k) female peers; (l) peers of both gender. To each situation, the children were asked to give three preferences of social contact whose support they would seek at the time of stress. However, most of the time only one preference was given.

No significant responses were obtained from the children in terms of the social contact of peers and siblings of different gender. Hence, for the purpose of analysis these options were clubbed together making a single category, one of peers (including male peers, female peers and peers of both gender) and

the other of siblings (including male siblings, female siblings and siblings of both gender). The responses given by the children were directly recorded on the interview schedule consisting of a list of stressful situations faced by the children. The data was coded and the frequency and percentage of responses calculated.

RESULTS

In this section we present the preference for companions by street children in different stressful situations. The frequency and percentage of responses for preference of social support in different stressful situations is given in Table 1. There were no significant age and occupation related differences in the preference for social contact.

Table 1 about here

Preference to be alone

Children's preference to stay alone is found to be high in almost all situations (see Figure 1 & Table 1). Majority of the children prefer to be alone when they have a fight with their peers (42%) or when they are scolded by their parents (40%). At work place, the children prefer to be alone when they are harassed by their customers (35%) and when troubled by the police/estate officers (33%). Preference to be alone is not found to be high when the children are in need of money (5%). Among boys and girls, more boys prefer to be alone when scolded by their parents (Boys: 56%; Girls: 24%) and when troubled by the police/estate officers (Boys: 40%; Girls: 26%).

Figure 1 about here

Preference for parental support

Though preference for the social support of parents has been reported in all the situations, majority of the children seek the support of their parents when in need of money (74%),

when they have a fight with their siblings (53%) and while doing the household chores (32%). However, in all the situations a larger percentage of children seek the support of their mother rather than that of the father (see Figure 2 & Table 1). Results reveal that a larger percentage of girls seek the support of their mothers as compared to the boys when they are in need of money (Girls: 56%; Boys: 48%), on a holiday (Girls: 26%; Boys: 8%) and when they have a fight with their siblings (Girls: 48%; Boys: 32%). In comparison to the support of the father, larger percentage of both boys and girls prefer the support of their mother irrespective of the stressful situation faced.

Figure 2 about here

Support of siblings

Children report that they seek the support of their siblings at the time of parental conflict (33%), while doing the household chores (34%), on a holiday (27%) and when scolded by the parents (24%). Other times when the children prefer to be with their siblings is when they are in need of money or when they have a fight with their peers (see Figure 3 & Table 1). Higher percentage of girls seek the support of their siblings when there is a parental conflict (Girls: 46%; Boys: 22%) and when they are scolded by their parents (Girls: 32%; Boys: 16%). Almost equal percentage of both boys and girls seek the support of siblings in stressful situations related to place of work, on a holiday and when they have a fight with their peers.

Figure 3 about here

Peer support

Children report that they prefer to be with their peers on a holiday when they need to make extra efforts to look for earnings. Since most of the children work in groups, they prefer to be with their peers on a holiday. Also, if the children stay

at home they would have to do more household chores (see Figure 3). Hence 33 percent of the children prefer to be out of the house with their peers on a holiday and when they have a fight with a different group of peers (14%). Higher percentage of girls seek the support of their peers when they are troubled by the customers (Girls: 12%; Boys: 4%) and when they have a fight with one group of friends (Girls: 20%; Boys: 8%). Boys mostly seek the support of peers on a holiday (Boys: 36%; Girls: 30%) though in the other situations, percentage of children seeking the support of peers is very low.

Support of grandparents

A very small percentage of children seek the support of their grandparents when in stressful situations probably because, many of the children are not staying with their grandparents while in some case the children have already lost their grandparents. However, children seek the support of grandparents when they are scolded by their parents (8%) or at the time of parental conflict (6%) with a larger percentage of girls reporting so.

Support of relatives and neighbours

Relatives and neighbours are found to be a popular choice for social support among children at the time of parental conflict (22%) and when they are scolded by their parents. In other situations, support of relatives and neigbhours is reported by a very small percentage of children.

Major highlights

* The children prefer to be alone in situations related to work place, which indicates that the children are able to handle their work - related problems on their own.
* Preference for the support of mother is more than that of the father in situations when the children are in need of money, when they have a fight with their siblings and when they are doing household chores.

* In problems related to home, the children prefer to be with their siblings while in problems related to earnings they prefer to be with their peers.
* Gender differences are evident with more boys prefering to be alone as compared to the girls.
* As compared to boys more girls seek the support of their mother in different stressful situations.
* Grandparents and relatives play a minimal role with a very small percentage of children prefering their support a the time of parental conflict.

DISCUSSION

Functional social contacts buffering stress

Social support has been defined as a source of coping assistance. Folkman and Lazarus (1988) define social support as what an individual "draws on in order to cope" and further say that such resources "precede and influence coping". Different categories of social exchanges have unique effects on well-being such as facilitating adaptation to life stress; bolstering self esteem or deterring deviant behaviour. House (1981, cited by Harlow and Cantor, 1995) distinguished four basic types of support: **emotional support** (actions that convey esteem); **appraisal support** (feedback about one's views or behaviours); **informational support** (advice that facilitates problem solving); and **informational support** (tangible assistance). Emotional support helps people feel better about themselves and their situation when things are not going well and includes intimacy, reassurance and sharing confidence whereas informational support is more task focused support such as giving advice or guidance that can aid problem solving. Emotional support thus helps to reduce psychological distress whereas informational support is effective in helping people reach desired ends.

Social support and companionship are considered to be two different forms of social interaction. Social support

involves social interaction aimed at problem alleviation whereas companionship involves social interaction aimed at providing mutual enjoyment. Social support is useful in reducing threats to well-being by facilitating adaptation to stressful life events whereas companionship is valuable in providing positive inputs to well-being such as recreation, humour and affection (Rook, 1987). Thus, buffering effects of social contact are expected when it involves help. Therefore, access to individuals who can provide advise, assistance and emotional reassurance is most important for those who are confronted by multiple major life stresses.

Seeking social support in stress

Results for the children's preference for social support in different stressful situations show that most children prefer to be alone. This is indicative of self reliance in children and their faith in their own competence and capacity to overcome any problem specially in those situations faced at the place of work, which for them are routine problems. Parental support which they seek more often is indicative of the presence of family solidarity and the mutual concern shared by the family members for each other. In a study (Kumar, 1994) it was found that despite the harsh disciplinary practices used by the parents of street children, there exists a feeling of belongingness and love in their families which is acknowledged both by the children and the parents themselves. Results of children's preference for support of parents and siblings are also indicative of the fact that the children have trust and faith in their families, the families unite to face crisis and feelings of familism are existing in the families of these children.

Children's effective coping in various situations helps them to keep away from a number of behavioural and emotional problems. Ineffective coping may have long term consequences for the children such as problems of maladjustment, depression, disturbance in their psycho-social well-being and a negative

mental image (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder & Simons, 1994; Harlow & Cantor, 1995). But high levels of problem oriented coping styles are sure to keep the children away from any such symptoms. Studies reveal that children from disorganized or rigid home environments may not develop a wide range of effective and situationally appropriate strategies. Children from high level of family structure exhibit fewer behaviour problems and aggressive behaviour and more responsible behaviour (Slater & Power, 1987, cited by Hardy, Power & Jaedicke, 1993) when confronted with stressful situations. Anybody's aim while facing stress would obviously be to get over with it. And that is exactly what the street children are doing. They get over the stress in their life, no matter how. Though in the eyes of the middle and upper class, the living styles and coping mechanisms of the children may not be appropriate. Oliveira et al. (1992, cited by Qvarsell, 1993, p.6) describe some of the street children as "vibrant, energetic, highly skilled, fast thinking youngsters" and characterized the usual idea of street children as inaccurate. The common view on street children as deprived, emotionally disabled and culturally backward is not true. They say that "as a whole street kids is a much more complicated and complex group of children than one might think of. They vary as do other kids and street life affords them thrills, challenges, fascinations as well as dangers and lack of shelter". They believe that "if one could use the best they have, these kids could become real potentials for problems". Therefore, one needs to remember that those who do not develop sufficient ways and means for living at their command, would not survive. Verbal abuses or even physical assertion used by the parents to discipline the children is a preparation to help the children fight for their survival in this world. Our role as members of the society is to ensure that survival for street children means a life worth living. It should mean fostering their well-being during the early years and beyond

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and providing a nurturing environment to enable children develop individual abilities (Saraswathi, 1993). However, it does not indicate the imposition of middle class values on the street children because these children have grown up in a different milieu. Individualistic appraisal of the situation is therefore required to work out relevant strategies for the betterment of street children.

IMPLICATIONS

* Need to foster the well being of children in the early years.
* To provide a nurturing environment to enable children develop individual abilities.
* To use feelings of family solidarity to the advantage of children by using family intervention strategies for the betterment of the lives of street children.
* Need to channelise the capabilities of street children to do things independently to enhance their self-esteem.
* Provide need based counselling to the children to deal with their problems more effectively and efficiently in a socially acceptable manner.
* To help street children develop appropriate life skills in light of the changed developmental tasks that they are faced with in their social environment.

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Table 1:

Frequency and percentage of responses of street children's preference for social support in stressful life situations by gender (N=100)

Situations		Alone	Mother	Father	Siblings	Peers	Grand parents	Relatives/ neighbours	Not applicable
1. Whose social support would you seek when troubled by police/estate officers?									
Male	F	20	9	2	2	2	-	1	14
n=50	%	40	18	4	4	4	-	2	28
Female	F	13	13	3	1	2	1	2	15
n=50	%	26	26	6	2	4	2	4	30
Total profile	%	33	22	5	3	4	1	3	29
2. Whose social support would you seek when you are troubled by elders/employers at place of work?									
Male	F	9	2	4	1	2	-	3	29
	%	18	4	8	2	4	-	6	58
Female	F	13	7	3	1	1	-	1	24
	%	26	14	6	2	2	-	2	48
Total profile	%	22	9	7	2	3	-	4	53
3. Whose social support would you seek when you are troubled by your customers?									
Male	F	23	4	2	3	2	-	3	11
	%	46	8	4	6	4	-	6	22
Female	F	12	6	4	3	6	1	1	17
	%	24	12	8	6	12	2	2	34
Total profile	%	35	10	6	6	8	1	4	28
4. Whose social support would you seek when in need of money?									
Male	F	3	24	12	8	1	1	1	-
	%	6	48	24	16	2	2	2	-
Female	F	2	28	10	4	2	2	2	-
	%	4	56	20	8	4	4	4	-
Total profile	%	5	52	22	12	3	3	3	-

Table 1 . contd..

Situations		Alone	Mother	Father	Siblings	Peers	Grand parents	Relatives/ neighbours	Not applicable
5. Whose social support do you prefer when you have a holiday at place of work?									
Male	F	12	4	1	13	18	1	-	1
	%	24	8	2	26	36	2	-	2
Female	F	1	13	3	14	15	2	1	1
	%	2	26	6	28	30	4	2	2
Total profile	%	13	17	4	27	33	3	1	2
6. At the time of fight with your peers whose social support do you prefer?									
Male	F	24	8	4	5	4	1	4	-
	%	48	16	8	10	8	2	8	-
Female	F	18	9	3	5	10	-	1	4
	%	36	18	6	10	20	-	2	8
Total profile	%	42	17	7	10	14	1	5	4
7. At the time of fight with your siblings whose social support do you prefer?									
Male	F	14	16	7	2	2	1	2	6
	%	28	32	14	4	4	2	4	12
Female	F	14	24	6	3	-	2	1	-
	%	28	48	12	6	-	4	2	-
Total profile	%	28	40	13	5	2	3	3	6
8. Whose social support do you seek when you are scolded by your parents?									
Male	F	28	1	1	8	2	1	5	4
	%	56	2	2	16	4	2	10	8
Female	F	12	1	4	16	2	7	5	3
	%	24	2	8	32	4	14	10	6
Total profile	%	40	2	5	24	4	8	10	7
9. While doing the household chores, whose support would you seek?									
Male	F	9	13	3	16	5	1	2	1
	%	18	26	6	32	10	2	4	2
Female	F	10	14	3	18	2	2	1	-
	%	20	28	6	36	4	4	2	-
Total profile	%	19	27	6	34	7	3	3	1

Table 1 - contd...

Situations		Alone	Mother	Father	Siblings	Peers	Grand parents	Relatives/ neighbours	Not applicable
10. Whose social support do you seek when your parents have a conflict?									
Male	F	13	2	-	10	2	3	12	8
	%	26	4	-	20	4	6	24	16
Female	F	5	-	-	23	3	3	10	6
	%	10	-	-	46	6	6	20	12
Total profile	%	18	2	-	33	5	6	22	14

Note:

It was reported by 2 children that they seek the support of their employer when troubled by the customers.

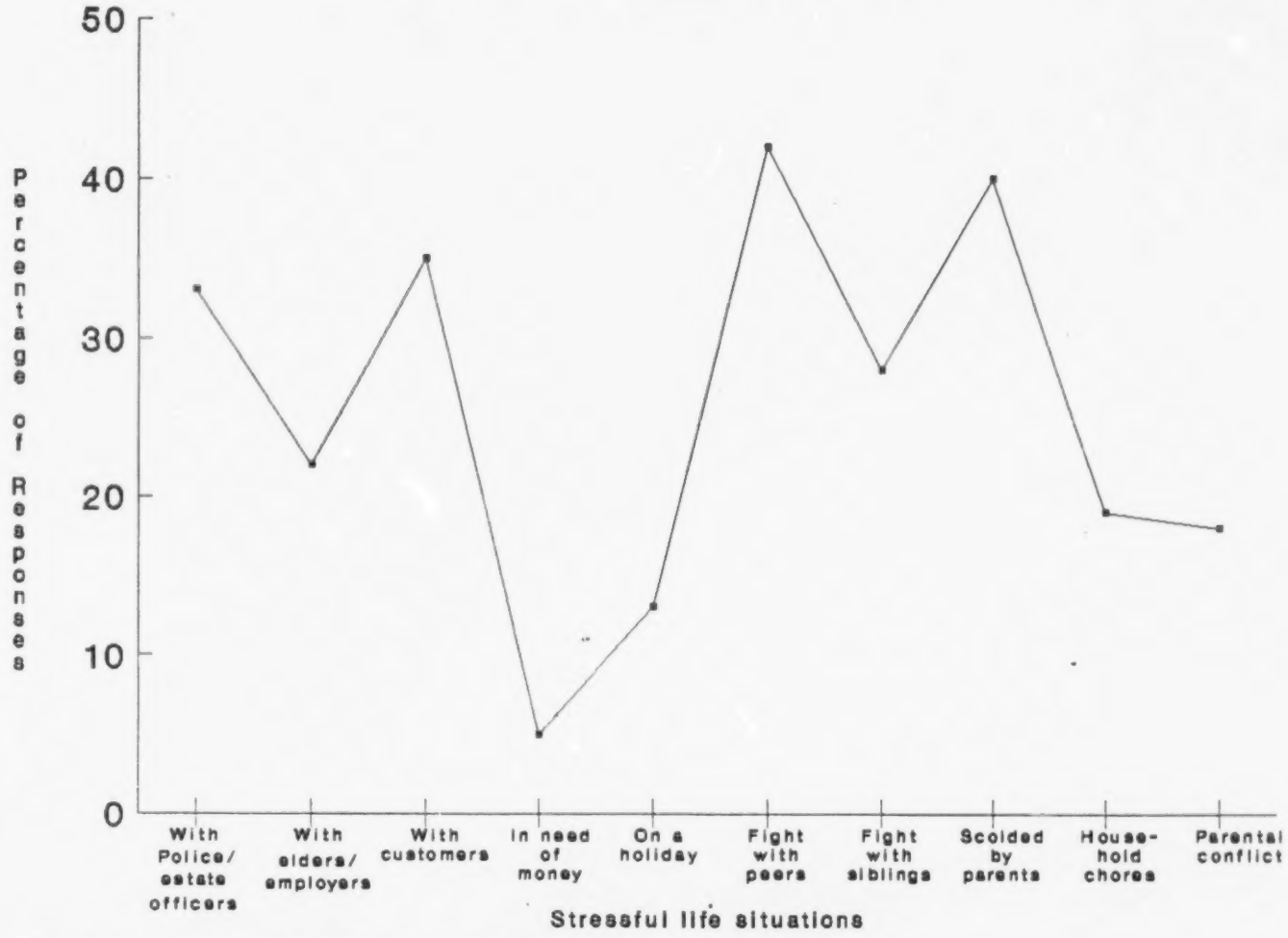

Figure 1 When do street children prefer to be alone

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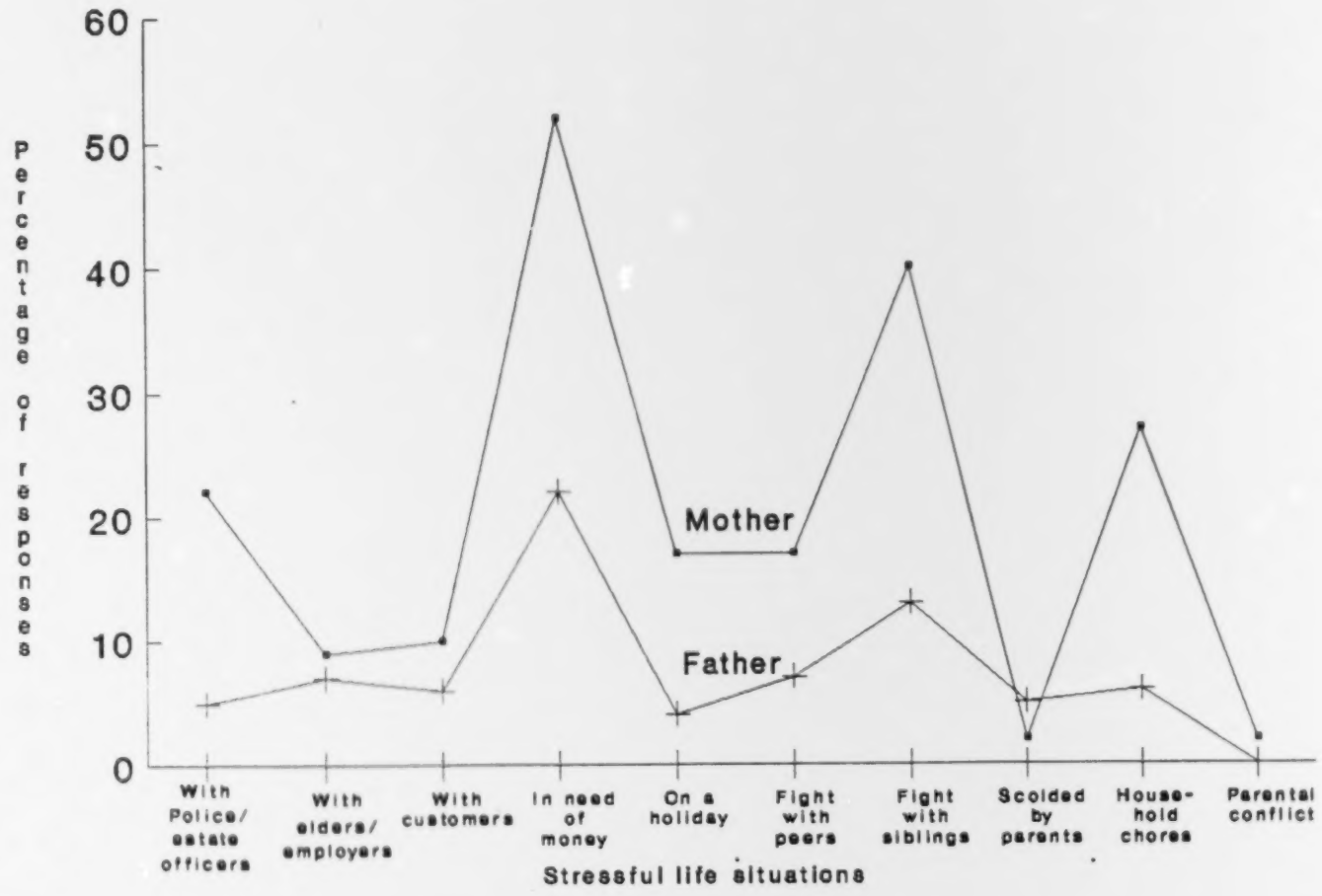

Figure 2 Street children's preference for support of parents

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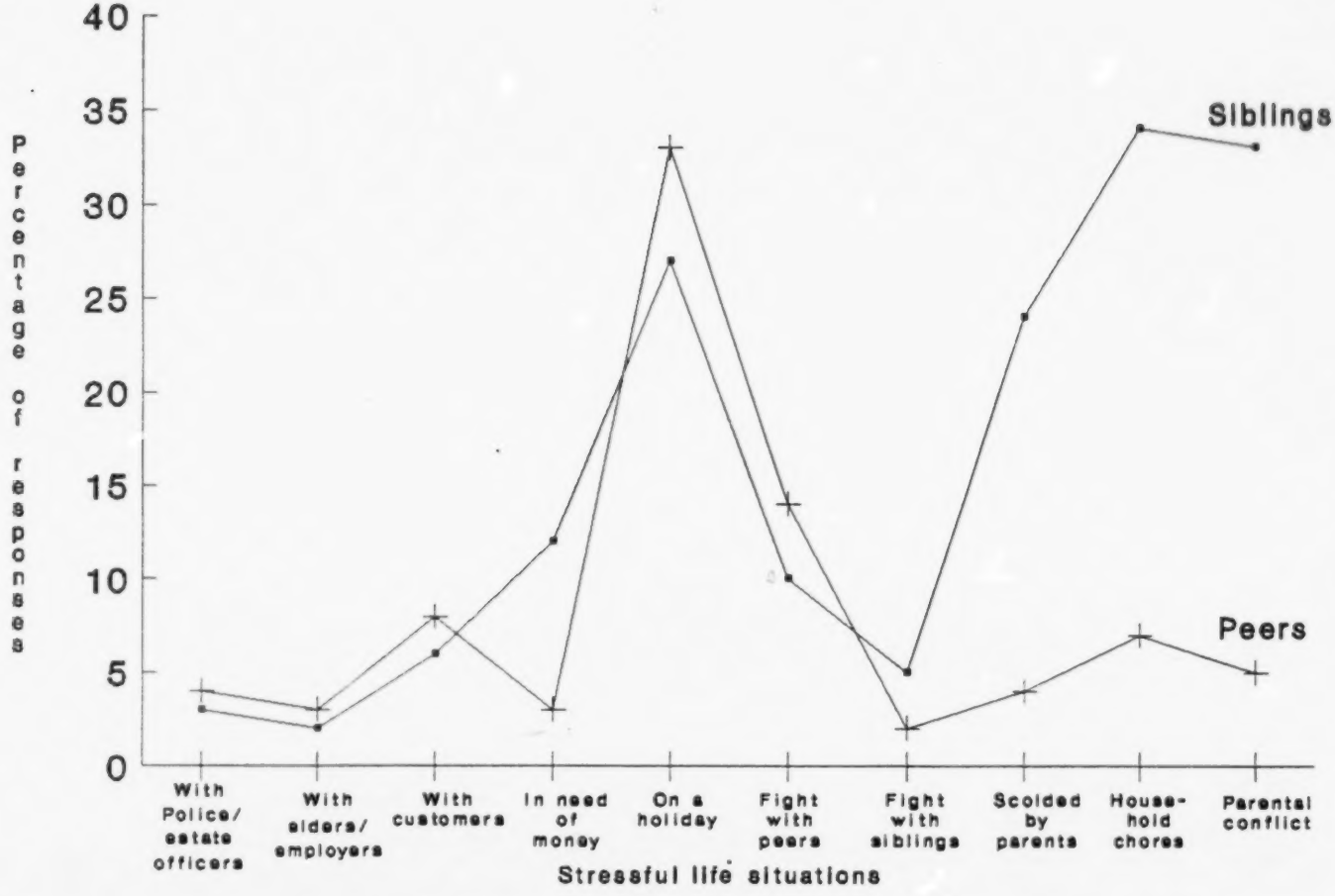

Figure 3 When do street children prefer the support of their siblings and peers